WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 1992

A Strong Entry in Assassination

BOOKS

Patricia Holt

JFK and Vietnam
By John M. Newman
Warner, 507 pages, $22.95

Oliver Stone's film "JFK" may win some Academy Awards on Monday, but the debate about his depiction of John F. Kennedy's assassination continues.

Just last week, actor Laurence Luckinbill, who has played Lyndon Johnson on stage, wrote a blistering letter to Variety in which he accused Stone of "getting away with murder" by portraying Johnson as a "co-conspirator" with CIA, FBI and military leaders in JFK's assassination.

How to prove the movie is a "lie," as Luckinbill calls it? "By the very documents upon which Stone bases his charges," he asserts: "National Security Action Memorandums (NSAM) Nos. 263 and 273."

Conclusion of 'JFK'

Those who have seen "JFK" will recall that Stone concludes the movie with these documents, alleging that NSAM 263, approved by Kennedy on Oct. 22, 1963, called

★★★ San Francisco Chronicle E 5

Conspiracy Theory

for secretly pulling troops *out* of Vietnam, while NSAM 273, approved by Johnson on Nov. 26, 1963 (three days after Kennedy's assassination), called for moving troops *in* to Vietnam.

Not so, says Luckinbill: "There is *no essential difference*" between the memos, he writes, and therefore "the entire premise of his movie" is wrong.

But now comes "JFK and Vietnam" by John M. Newman, an impeccably researched, detail-crowded book that answers many of the questions Luckinbill and others have asked.

Newman, an Army major who teaches Vietnam history at the University of Maryland, was a consultant to Stone on "JFK," so we can anticipate his premise — that Kennedy was assassinated by a military-CIA-FBI-government conspiracy because he planned to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam.

Once-Classified Material

To say Newman makes a good case is an understatement. Using previously classified material and interviews with military leaders, Newman documents, with hundreds of footnotes, every Vietnam-related move that Kennedy and Johnson made from January 1961 through November 1963.

Certainly, he shows a difference between the NSAM memos to which Luckinbill refers: In NSAM 263, he quotes Kennedy directing "that no formal announcement be made of the implementation of plans to withdraw 1,000 U.S. mili-

John F. Kennedy: The assassination debate continues

tary personnel by the end of 1963." In NSAM 273, Johnson ordered that "planning should include different levels of possible increased activity," which Newman says "opened the door to direct U.S. attacks against North Vietnam."

But perhaps the more shocking portrayal is that of Johnson as an out-of-control hawk who supported early intervention in Laos against "unanimous opposition" in the White House; refused to go to Vietnam at Kennedy's behest but then, once there, "committed the U.S. to provide equipment (helicopters and armored personnel carriers)..."; and helped the Joint Chiefs of Staff prepare the way to move troops into Vietnam.

Deep Deception

Much has been written about the clash of hawks and doves among military leaders around Kennedy, and about the so-called "body count" misinformation given to the press. Newman goes further; he documents what he calls a "deception within the deception," referring to lies told not only to the press but also to the President himself through MACVs (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam). "reprehensible" and "sordid sleight of hand" in juggling of figures.

Kennedy also has been accused of initiating the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, but Newman makes it clear that although Kennedy supported a coup in Vietnam that would oust Diem, he was floored by the news that Diem had been executed: "Kennedy leaped to his feet and rushed from the room with a look of shock and dismay on his face which I had never seen before," Newman quotes Maxwell Taylor. "He had always insisted that Diem must never suffer more than exile..."

Doubts Expressed

Newman details a number of times when Kennedy expressed his desire to get out of Vietnam. On Feb. 12, 1963, for example, Newman portrays Kennedy making a rare disclosure to his Vietnam nemesis, Oregon Senator Wayne Morse: "I want you to know you're absolutely right in your criticism of my Vietnam policy." And on November 21, Newman says, Kennedy also told National Security Council member Michael Forrestal that a "complete and very profound review of how we got into (Vietnam)" should be compiled. He added, "I even want to think about whether or not we should be there." The next day, Kennedy was dead.

Newman naturally selects documents that support his premise, but he is so fastidious about quoted statements and references (not to mention his glossary, index, chronology, bibliography and lists of persons and acronyms) that we cannot help but keep an open mind. Add "JFK and Vietnam" to the list of important contributions to the continuing debate about the Kennedy assassination — and about the way our government operates.